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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 000618

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: APRIL 9 PROTEST MACHINATIONS IN FULL SWING

REF: A. TBILISI 585

[1](#)B. TBILISI 559

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Both the GOG and non-parliamentary opposition groups are formulating their plans to handle the upcoming April 9 protests at which the opposition will demand the resignation of President Saakashvili and holding new presidential elections. The GOG intends to take a low key approach, and is apparently willing to let protesters stay as long as they desire as long as the demonstrators are peaceful and lawful. The makeup of the non-parliamentary participants is still in flux as they debate how to organize, how to maintain control over the crowd, and how to stop violence. Both sides are concerned the other will provoke violence, yet both seem to be striking the right chord about the importance of maintaining a peaceful protest. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: Tension is growing among the public especially after the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA) released video footage of Burjanadze supporters allegedly purchasing illegal arms. Nonetheless, the GOG and the non-parliamentary opposition have been saying they are committed to lawful expression of views and both sides have a strong incentive to avoid violence. The GOG, at least on the surface, appears to have learned some valuable lessons from its handling of the November 2007 protests and vows to take a hands off approach. Most of the non-parliamentary opposition appear to be unflinching in their demands for Saakashvili to resign and determined to carry out what is shaping up to be a significant protest. GOG officials for their part seem concerned about the potential for violence but largely unconcerned about the political significance of the protests. It remains too early to judge what if any effect the arrest of Burjanadze supporters will have on the political dynamic, but as of yet, the news has not served to galvanize support for the demonstrators. End Comment.

GOG Confident - Prepared to Let the Protesters Stay as Long as Protests are Peaceful

[1](#)3. (C) From the highest levels of government on down, GOG officials say, both publicly and privately, they will take a hands off approach to the protests. Minister of Interior Vano Merabishvili told the Ambassador that he intended to set up a monitoring mechanism so international observers could see from the inside how the MOIA was handling their response to the crowd. He reiterated this point before a March 25 gathering of the diplomatic corps at MOIA. Speaker Bakradze told the Ambassador that the GOG intended to let the protests last as long as the protesters wanted if they were non-violent. In fact, GOG leaders see no upside in dispersing the protesters before they are ready to leave. UNM MP David Darchiashvili (Chairman of Euro-Integration Committee) told Poloff that he expected the protests to be sizable but that most would lose interest after a day or two of non-violent protests. Darchiashvili explained that the "Vake and Saburtalo" elites liked to complain and strongly dislike "Misha" but that they valued their privileged existence more. Darchiashvili said this group, which he

expected would make up a majority of the protesters had jobs, obligations and ultimately had no real interest in assuming the arduous task of actually engaging long term on political issues.

14. (C) UNM MP Akaki Minashvili (Chairman of Foreign Relations Committee) and UNM MP Chiora Taktakishvili (Deputy Chairperson of the Legal Committee) agreed with Darchiashvili's statements. Minashvili said he expected the QDarchiashvili's statements. Minashvili said he expected the crowds to be around 25-30,000 but that was only a "guess". The apparent operating assumption of the GOG is that any large-scale protests will quickly fizzle out, and any reaction by the GOG would only serve to legitimize a movement that is fully capable of destroying itself if left to its own devices. None of the MP's appeared concerned that the protesters would actually accomplish their aim of regime change nor did any other GOG interlocutors. Nonetheless, the GOG has made clear it has an obligation to maintain the peace and that any violent action by the opposition such as storming a government building or otherwise would necessitate that law enforcement organs react accordingly to prevent criminal behavior. The major underlying GOG concern is that with a large crowd, any "drunken idiot" could incite violence.

Both Side Want to Avoid Violence

15. (C) The one issue all agree on is the need to refrain from violence. According to Former UN Ambassador, Irakli Alasania (Alliance), the non-parliamentary opposition has been discussing ways to deal with those among their ranks who would incite violence. He stated that they had spoken about blocking the Parliament themselves if protesters tried to

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storm it among other things. Alasania agreed that a larger crowd could be more difficult to control. Numerous opposition members have expressed their concerns that the MOIA would plant provocateurs among the crowd to incite violence which would be blamed on the protesters. The provocation would then serve as a pretext for a GOG crackdown on protesters. GOG officials dismiss this scenario as absurd, pointing out that any violence whatsoever would have very negative consequences for the GOG and any such plot would soon be uncovered. (Embassy Comment: We see no incentive for the Government to incite violence. If violence occurs, the side largely seen as initiating violence would face serious political backlash, domestic and internationally. End Comment).

Non-Parliamentary Opposition - Still Divided

16. (C) The non-parliamentary opposition continues to be united by one issue, their desire to see Saakashvili resign. They continue to discuss tactics and goals; however, confusion rather than coherence continues to plague their efforts. Alasania told DAS Bryza and the Ambassador March 25 that he was attempting to convince the non-parliamentary opposition to limit the protest to one day. He thought such a signal would show that the non-parliamentary opposition could organize large numbers of citizens peacefully and would serve as a strong political statement. Alasania expressed doubt that all parties would agree to such a tactic. Continuing to be substantially more moderate in private than in public, Alasania agreed that Saakashvili would not resign, and the goal of continuous protests to achieve it was unrealistic and counterproductive for the country. Nevertheless, it remains unclear if Alasania can convince any other non-parliamentary leaders to follow his lead. Alasania stated that he believed if the protests simply die out, the non-parliamentary leaders will have little political leverage. Alasania worried that some of his colleagues had painted themselves into a rhetorical corner and expressed to both DAS Bryza and the Ambassador that he was ready, willing, and able to speak with GOG authorities about a way to avoid confrontation.

Channels Are Open but Will They Be Used?

17. (C) Speaker Bakradze explicitly told the Ambassador that the GOG was willing to speak with non-parliamentary opposition members, especially Alasania, regarding potential areas of compromise to avoid further conflict. Among the areas the GOG was open to discussing was constitutional changes which would reduce the power of the President and increase that of Parliament. Bakradze mentioned Givi Targamadze as a potential channel of communication between the UNM and the opposition. Opposition MP Gia Tortladze has also been mentioned as a go-between. Alasania told DAS Bryza and the Ambassador that he was under the impression that he would be able to speak briefly with Saakashvili when both were recently in Brussels for the German Marshall Fund conference, but it did not materialize. At a minimum, the GOG and Alasania appear to be open to dialogue, but Alasania admitted that many in the non-parliamentary opposition have no interest in any sort of dialogue or compromise.

18. (C) Deputy Minister Gia Baramidze told the Ambassador and Polchief March 26 that he was also trying to reach out to the opposition. As the leader of the wing in UNM associated with former Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, Baramidze said that he understood from participating in political protests over the past 20 years how quickly demonstrations could get out of control. He had scheduled a meeting later in the day with Republican Party leader David Usupashvili, and said he would also attempt to meet Alasania. He said that President Saakashvili supported his efforts. (Embassy Note: Saakashvili called Baramidze twice during the meeting. End Note.). The Ambassador encouraged Baramidze to seek to open a dialogue and find a peaceful way out of the political impasse.

Let's Negotiate - But What About and With Whom

18. (C) While members of both sides may be open to dialogue, the obvious roadblock remains the opposition's call for the president's resignation and presidential elections. Currently, the non-parliamentary opposition has no other political demands. Deputy Foreign Minister, Giga Bokeria told DAS Bryza and the Ambassador March 25 that dialogue would be "great" but pointedly asked why President Saakashvili should reach out to somebody (Alasania) who is calling for his unconstitutional removal. Bokeria continued saying that Alasania refused to join the Election Law Working Group, and recently signed "some ridiculous document" in support of Burjanadze claiming the arrest of her supporters was political intimidation without having even seen the evidence. Bokeria said that the GOG would be willing to

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speak to Alasania but that Alasania had a tendency to talk out of both sides of his mouth, and at every turn had rebuffed avenues of cooperation. As Bokeria noted, Alasania cannot have it both ways, being a moderate in private and a radical in public. Bokeria indicated that Alasania would have to signal something significant in public before anybody would take his willingness to negotiate at face value.

19. (C) Bokeria wryly noted that after April 9, the non-parliamentary opposition would negotiate. From the non-parliamentary opposition, only Alasania seems ready to consider an alternative way forward to avoid street confrontation, but even he expressed doubts that others would follow. There have been few indications that the more radical members of the non-parliamentary opposition would be open to negotiations even if the protests fizzle out. Until the non-parliamentary opposition drops their "non-negotiable" demand for the president's resignation, any sort of compromise is hard to imagine. Secondly, beyond their desire to oust the president, the non-parliamentary opposition's aims are widely divergent, serving to further

complicate any potential for negotiations both before and after April 9.

Guns, Burjanadze, and Armed Uprising

¶10. (C) The arrest of nine of Nino Burjanadze's supporters on weapons charges has captivated an increasingly worried public. Burjanadze initially told DAS Bryza and the Ambassador March 25 that the whole scenario was an MOIA orchestrated set-up. Burjanadze questioned the authenticity of the videos, and said she was investigating what truly had occurred. Later in the conversation she admitted that some of those arrested might actually have violated the law and sought to promote violence. She disassociated herself from both. While it appears a majority of the public has not formed a hardened opinion on the matter, the arrests have heightened a growing anxiety among the public that the protests have the potential to turn violent. Opposition leaders have claimed the evidence was fabricated to deter individuals from protesting, while the GOG has maintained the arrests were not politically motivated. Burjanadze said the arrests will not affect her decision to participate (or not) in April 9 protests.

TEFFT